

BIRDS AND DROUGHT IN CENTRAL-WESTERN QUEENSLAND.

By F. L. BERNEY.

THE disastrous drought that has gripped Western-Central and Western-Northern Queensland during the past few years must have very seriously affected local bird life, not alone by actual deaths, but also by the absence of increase of broods. To emus the result has been tragic, and they have been totally exterminated on many holdings. Previously one would be certain of seeing them in the course of any day's ride on Barcarolle. On occasions I have had as many as seventeen or eighteen grown birds in sight at once, and each winter, if there was sufficient rain, two or three broods would be reared. To-day not a solitary individual survives here. The fencing of the country, especially the tall dog-netting fences—for they could get over the ordinary six-wire fence—has spelt ruination to these interesting birds, for as paddocks went dry the stock would be moved elsewhere but the emus remained to perish. Much as this was deplored, there was no help for it, but I am glad to say that none perished of thirst on this place.

From the middle of February 1925 to the latter part of June 1926, a matter of nearly seventeen months, I saw absolutely no evidence of any bird nesting. Even the Corvidæ, birds that one would think would rather revel in hard times with so many dead animals about, were not nesting, but that is perhaps to their credit, indicating that they require not carrion but a variety of insects on which to rear their nestlings.

As the result of two inches of rain in May 1926, the period from 25th June that year to July 1927 showed a slight improvement, but still very few birds have nested, very few indeed. As a matter of fact my records extend to seven species only, perhaps a dozen nests all told, and in four of these that I was able to keep under observation the owners had restricted themselves to very small broods, as follows:—

Galah, *Kakatoe roseicapilla* (average clutch four to five eggs), two eggs only; Yellow-throated Miner, *Myzantha flavigula* (clutch three to five eggs), two eggs only; Yellow Weebill, *Smicrornis flavescens* (clutch two to three eggs), one egg only; Black-backed Magpie, *Gymnorhina tibicen* (clutch three to five), two eggs only. The remaining birds noted nesting were Crested Pigeon, *Ocyphaps lophotes*; Yellow-tailed Tit, *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*, and one of the *Artami*.

During the period from July 1927 to date, 21st February, 1928, drought conditions have continued and very few birds have nested. Perhaps the most striking evidence of the dryness of the season is the fact that I have not, during that period, seen a single instance of nesting among such very hardy and common birds as Galahs, *K. roseicapilla*, Black-backed Magpies, *G. tibicen*, and Crested Pigeon, *O. lophotes*.

It is impossible to overlook the first-named when nesting, for the unceasing wheezing crying of the young birds fills the air from daylight to dark and is very trying. As it is I have not heard a sound from a youngster this spring or summer. A pair of Galahs that always have made use of a hollow bloodwood tree right against the homestead buildings for nesting purposes have nested once only during the past three seasons. They have been about all the time, and once in anticipation of rain relined the nest with green eucalypt leaves, but the rain failing they did no more. I am satisfied that it is the same pair that have occupied this tree for very many years.

I believe some of these nesting sites in old hollow trees have, like ancestral homes in the old country, been in the possession of the same family of Galahs for many generations, perhaps hundreds of years; when one of the pair died the other found a mate from among unattached birds, but the old home would never be deserted.

During the past three years our total rainfall has been $17\frac{1}{2}$ inches, when we should have had, according to the average of nearly forty years, about 4 feet. Under the circumstances, insects, particularly caterpillars and grasshoppers, have been very scarce, and the same applies to seeds and berries.

The crop of fruit on small berry-bearers such as *Carissa lanceolata* and the Mistletoes (*Loranthi*) has been a failure for a couple of seasons, many bunches of the latter having died.
